

Luke O'Day, Ian Babson, and Nick Johnson attend to oyster seedlings in Duxbury Bay.

STAFF PHOTO/CHRIS SHORE

Just add water

How Island Creek Oysters grow their product

Part two on Island Creek Oysters and their product

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DUXBURY — When Skip Bennett founded Island Creek Oysters 15 years ago, he took a chance, a chance that has lead him from the shores of Duxbury Bay, to a menu in Colorado, and onto the pristine china at the White House. Through trial and error, Bennett and his crew have managed to make an oyster bay out of an unnatural bay for oysters.

Bennett first began receiving his oyster seedlings from a nursery in Maine that Christian Horne's family owned. After working with Bennett for a few years, Horne decided to move to Duxbury and get a farm of his own and join Island Creek Oysters, becoming the

second man in the growing business. In the early stages of Island Creek Oysters they were selling their product through wholesale to fish markets. Through that partnership they found their third man, Don Merry. After working the counter at Back River Fish Market in Duxbury, Merry decided he wanted to try his hand at farming as well.

The process used to grow oysters in Duxbury is very different from oyster farmers in other parts of New England. For one, the water in Duxbury is colder, and two, it is an unnatural habitat. Once they receive the seedlings from Maine, they are placed into underwater silos called upwellers. This year, Merry received about two million seedlings that he spread out in four silos, in a troth under the docks used at Duxbury Bay

Maritime School. The oysters sit on a screen where the water is forced up through the oysters and pulled out through a pump, allowing for a constant flow of water through the upwellers that allow the oysters to grow at a rapid pace. Merry said the oysters are noticeably larger from one day to the next, and even as much as a couple of hours.

"They're like popcorn, once they start growing they just keep growing," Merry said.

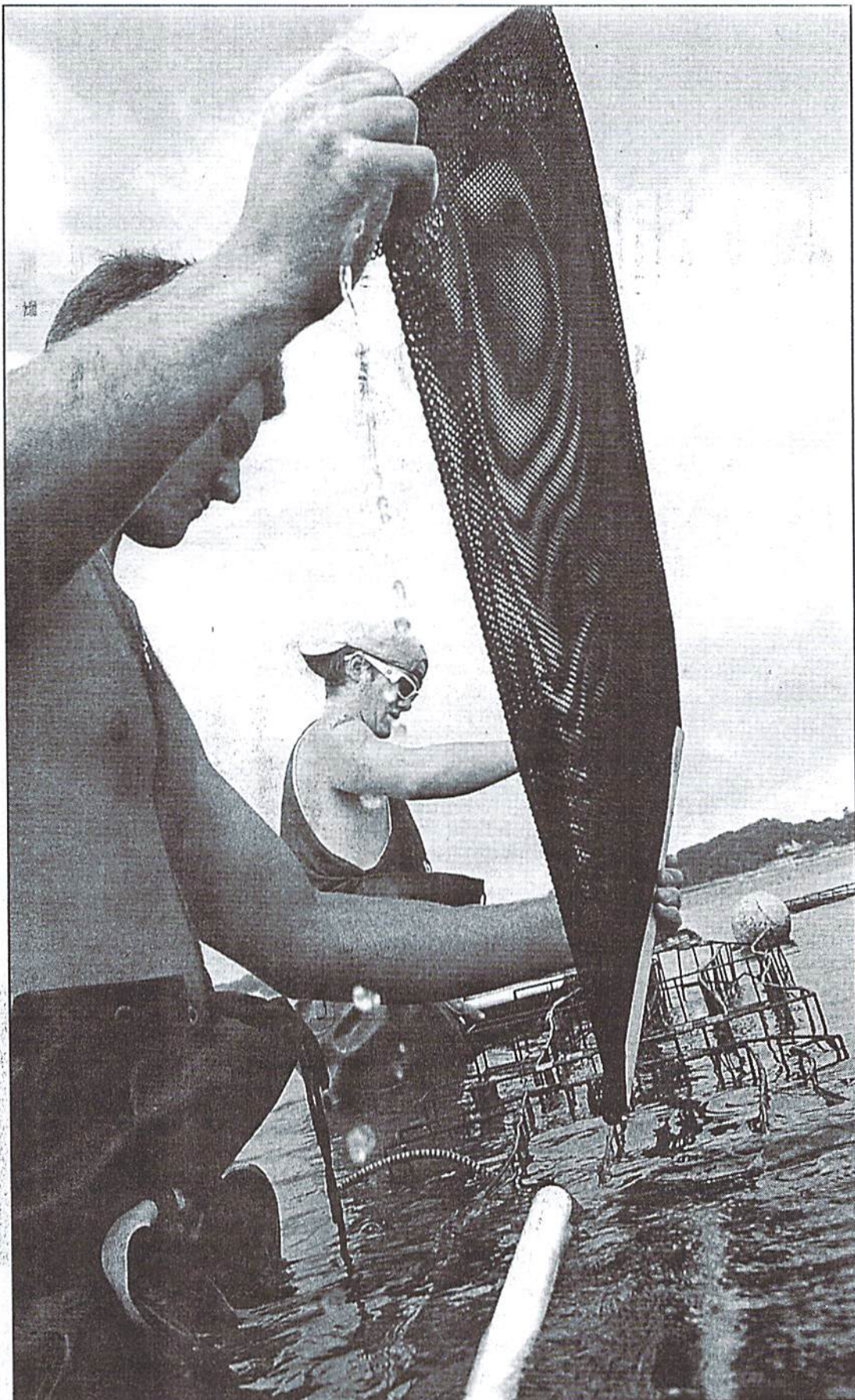
The seedlings spend approximately two to three months in the silos maturing before being transferred into the mesh nutrient bags and spread out along the bay. Bennett said the bay flushes out approximately 70 to 80 percent of the water twice a day, constantly circulating the water and bringing in cooler water to

the oysters. Because of the tides they are able to grow and harvest their oysters all year long, making their product unique to the bay. The cold water prevents the oysters from spawning. It also contributes to the quality of the oyster as Island Creek Oysters are very salty and very sweet because of the colder water temperatures.

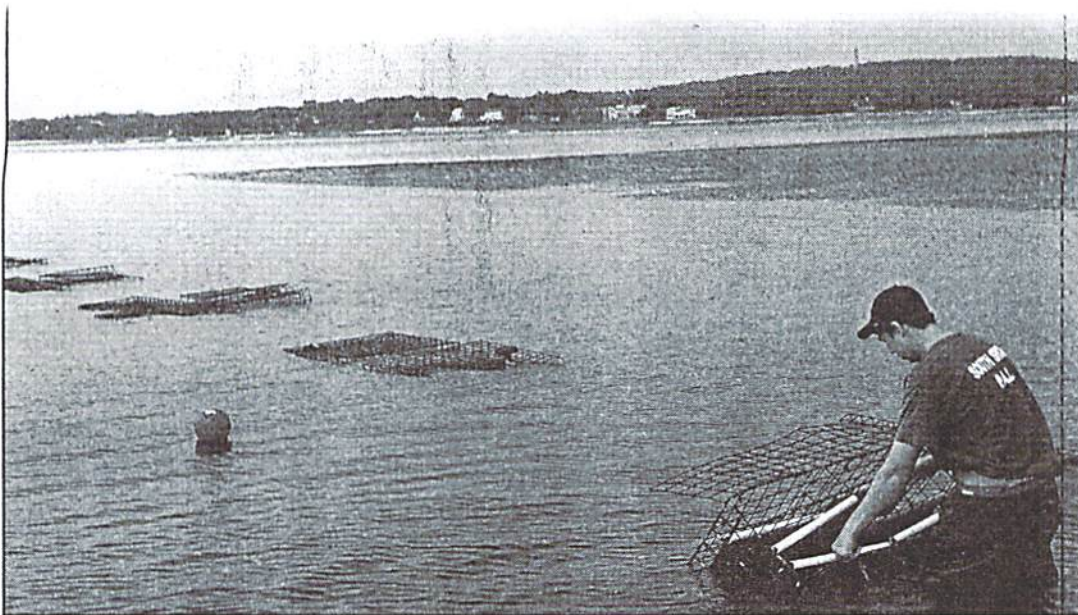
Bennett, Horne and Merry "blazed the trail" for the oyster farming business in Duxbury, Bennett said, because the oysters do not grow wild, they had to figure out how to grow them on their own.

"Oysters are not wild to Duxbury Bay," Bennett said. "There were no resources and no manual on how to grow them, we had to learn how to grow them differently."

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Luke O'Day and Ian Babson place new nursery bags with seedlings into the water.



Nick Johnson organizes oyster nursery bags in Duxbury Bay.

How to make an oyster

FROM OYSTERS, PAGE 1

When Island Creek Oysters first got going the company was selling about 100,000 oysters a year. After Sept. 11, 2001, the economy dropped and people stopped going out to eat as frequently and the sale of oysters began declining, Bennett said. That was a turning point for Island Creek Oysters, when they began not only selling wholesale, but selling directly to restaurants and buyers themselves. They began doing the growing, farm-

ing and now the distributing.

"Restaurants like the fact they were distributed directly, it cuts out the middle man and makes it more personal," Bennett said.

Merry said that 2001 was really the start of Island Creek Oysters; it changed from a local business to a national business. Their product of what they grow and sell has also increased dramatically, he said.

"After 9/11 Island Creek Oysters was selling 100,000 oysters a year, now we sell that in a

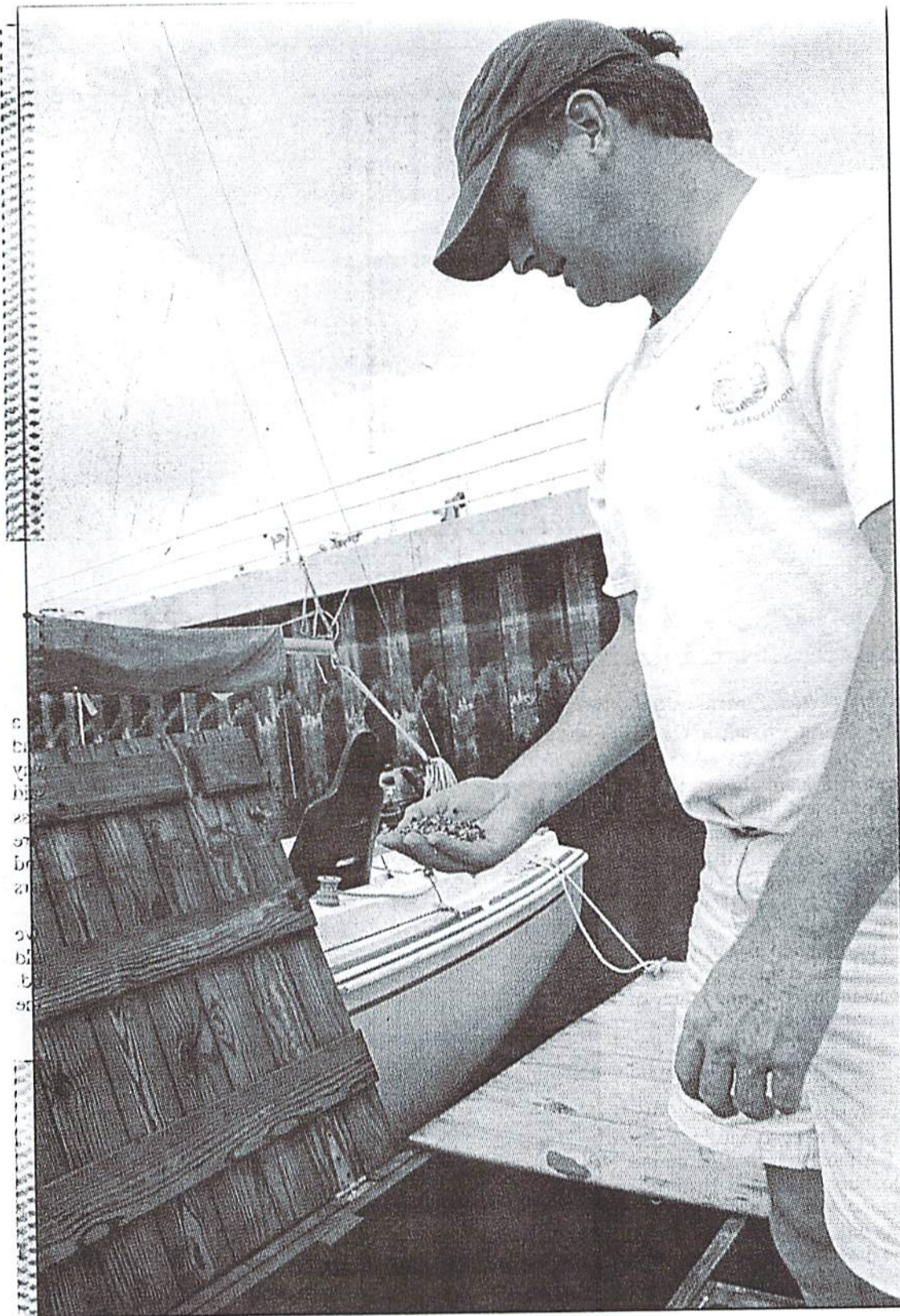
week," Merry said.

From a hatchery in Maine to a plate at the White House, Island Creek Oysters has made its way around. Bennett and Merry said they never imagined the business growing this much, and they are excited to see where Island Creek Oysters will be four years from now.

"While this is exciting, we never even thought that we could reach that goal," Merry said. "People really responded to the quality of our oysters."



Don Merry of Island Creek Oysters shows the growth of one of his oysters.



Don Merry of Island Creek Oysters in Duxbury checks on his seedlings before heading out to the nursery in Duxbury Bay.

Staff photos by Chris Shores



Ian Babson, Nick Johnson Elena Manning, and Luke O'Day organize oyster bags in Duxbury Bay.



Elena Manning unloads the bags from the boat to the other workers as they fill the oyster nursery.